



## Franklin County commuters feel gas-price pinch

By ROB LUFF Staff writer

The complaints at the pump are getting louder, especially for people with long commutes to work.

Franklin County is uniquely positioned between the state capital and the national capital, so residents have an abundance of job opportunities. But they come with long commutes that are feeling a significant impact from the gas crisis.

Mike Ross, president of Franklin County Area Development Corp., said although the strain of high gas prices affects commuters first, certain industries in Franklin County may begin to share the burden.

"It clearly is having an impact on those commuters," Ross said. "The potential fallout is in the hospitality industry."

Now that gas is nearing \$4 per gallon, people, especially long-distance commuters, have less disposable income than they had a few years ago, Ross said. Eating out is one of the first cuts people tend to make in their budgets, so the food service and hospitality industries feel the strain before other businesses.

Waynesboro resident Rick Jenson, who commutes to Harrisburg four days a week, said his recent pay raise has become virtually non-existent.

"It's been rough," Jenson said. "I got a raise this year and it's pretty much canceled it out."

The financial strain has intensified enough that Jenson said he would consider moving closer to work, but he is staying in Waynesboro for his children. He also considered buying a hybrid car, but he is still paying off the lease on his current vehicle, leaving his hands tied.

"Right now I'm basically at my limits with everything," Jenson said.

Several commuters are seeking alternative means of travel to lighten the strain on their finances. A handful of residents in the area use bus and subway services to get to work, freeing them financially and enabling them to work or relax while someone drives for them.

Commuter buses run from Shippensburg to central Harrisburg, with stops in Newville and Carlisle. The bus stops at 5:40 and 6:40 each morning in the Kmart parking lot on Walnut Bottom Road, Shippensburg, and the ride to Harrisburg takes just more than an hour. Another route travels to Mechanicsburg's naval depot from the same stops.

"I think it was designed for people who were working a full day," said Shippensburg resident Matt Pouss, who used to take the bus to

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Harrisburg three days a week for a government internship. "It worked perfect for me."

Other popular buses travel much farther than Harrisburg. Franklin County resident Neil Coleman has been commuting to the Washington, D.C., area by bus for 19 years. Early every morning he drives to Hagerstown, Md., to take a bus to Shady Grove Metro Station in Gaithersburg, Md., then rides the Metro system the rest of the way to work. As the route's longest-running rider, he has noticed a great increase in the number of riders since gas prices began spiking above \$3.

"I've never seen this kind of ridership," Coleman said. Although his commute gives him a long day, Coleman appreciates the bus service, continuing to use it because of its reliability and cost-effectiveness. A 10-trip ticket costs customers \$45, which Coleman said is rather economical.

If a car averages 30 miles per gallon on the interstate and gas costs \$3.95 per gallon, it would cost the driver roughly \$64 to drive from Hagerstown to Shady Grove and back over a five-day work week. With gas prices continuing to rise, drivers will be saving more than \$19, and they leave the driving to somebody else.

Public transportation does more than just save money, Coleman said. It molds his weekday lifestyle. During the long bus ride, he has forged lasting friendships with other commuters, and over the years some of his friends' children have begun traveling the same route. Many more have begun riding this year, and recently people were

left behind because the bus was full, Coleman said.

"Clearly there's been an increase (in ridership)," said Jack Cahalan of Maryland Department of Transportation. Between March 2007 and March 2008, the average number of riders using the Hagerstown bus route to Shady Grove increased by 13 percent, he said. The route now transports more than 1,000 commuters to work each day. Because of the increasing number of riders, MDOT is increasing the number of buses to the Frederick and Washington, D.C., areas.

Cahalan said although the commutes are long, many customers appreciate the time free from driving to unwind from a day of work or to get more work done on the bus.

"Many of our customers enjoy using the bus for a variety of reasons, certainly for (financial) reasons but also for lifestyle reasons," Cahalan said. "It's the old saying 'you're leaving the driving to us.' That's really what they're doing."

Some commuters prefer carpooling to public transportation. Warren Township resident Gerald Berny used to follow the same commute as Coleman, but switched to a 14-passenger van-pool with several fellow federal government employees four years ago. Between them they rent the van from Van-Pool Services Inc. With gas included, each commuter pays \$180 per month.

"It's been a good thing for people trying to save gas," Berny said. Although the group now spends around \$300 more per week on gas, it resulted in

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an increase of only \$20 per passenger. But with a \$75 limit at the gas station the group uses, they cannot fill the tank. Now they have to fill up more frequently.

The van arrangement also saves the passengers time, shortening their commute by 45 minutes compared to public transportation. Comfort was a bonus as well, because Berny said several men and women had been groped by strangers while riding the Metro, an uncomfortable reality they do not miss.

But they do sacrifice flexibility, Berny said, as sometimes meetings will run late and passengers will have to catch the bus instead. All in all though, the group appreciates their van.

Many more Franklin County drivers are left to fend for themselves, unable or unwilling to use public transportation but still needing to pay for gas. It has made people more willing to talk to each other at the pump, at least to complain.

"A lot of people (complain) about it, but that's just the way it is," said Mercersburg resident Richard Lynch. "You do what you've got to do. The oil companies are ripping us off. It's wrong." Lynch drives a pickup truck, and was filling up with a bill just north of \$80.

"I always hear people chit-chatting about raising gas prices," said Shippensburg resident Stacy Hutchison. As a flower shop owner she has to deal with the high cost of deliveries impacting her business.

The added "chit-chat" is making its way to the counters as well, as agitated customers unload on cashiers.

"If only you were here when people complain," Lisa Heaster said, laughing.

A cashier at Bill's Kwik Chek Market in Chambersburg, Heaster and her co-workers just laugh it off. "It depends on what their priority is," she said of dealing with the prices. "Is their priority work and filling the tank with gas or are they buying cigarettes and lottery tickets?"

-- Staff writer Alisha Varner contributed to this story.

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Rob Luff can be reached at 262-4754 or [rluff@publicopinionnews.com](mailto:rluff@publicopinionnews.com).

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